

## **Legacies of the British Empire:**

### **David Cameron in Amritsar**



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Some interesting points have arisen out of [David Cameron's recent visit to India](#). Ostensibly this was an affirmation of the 'special relationship' between India and Britain, but was also clearly an attempt to drum up arms deals between the two countries.

#### [The Amritsar Massacre, 13 April 1919](#)

During the visit Cameron visited the Jallianwallah Bagh memorial in the City of Amritsar where, in 1919, hundreds of civilians were shot during peaceful political meetings at the command of a British officer, Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer. The massacre resulted in scandal - though not complete disgrace for the British officials in charge - leaving a lasting resentment amongst many in India. Dyer was eventually found to have been in breach of his orders by the British Hunter Commission and was relieved of his command. Opinions in Britain by no means universally condemned the act: Dyer was offered a golden pension of £26,000 raised in a public appeal to save a 'hero's'

reputation. Meanwhile, though the Hunter Commission did find Dyer's actions to have been in the extreme, the majority report did not condemn him to a satisfactory level. It was only the minority report, provided by the three Indian lawyers sitting for the commission, which went as far as to morally condemn Dyer. There was no monolithic British condemnation of the act in Britain, as Cameron claimed [last week](#). For many in Britain, Dyer remained a hero who had stopped an imagined conspiracy in the Punjab. Indian nationalists would never forget the massacre, and for Indians today Amritsar is remembered as a [national symbol of unity and sacrifice](#).

This event has been hugely contentious in historiography. Even into the 21st Century debates go on about the 'necessity' of Dyer's actions as a result of a state of chaos in the Punjab as proposed in Nick Lloyd's, *The Amritsar Massacre: The Untold Story of One Fateful Day* (2011). Nigel Collett and others have sought to prevent such dangerous revisions of what they perceive to be a shameful event in Britain's history. (See the reviewers debates for example between [Wagner vs. Lloyd](#), and [Collett vs. Lloyd](#).)

It is great that in Britain we are able to have lively academic exchange about the nature of the British Empire. I would thoroughly encourage any budding student to look into the

imperial past. David Cameron, and many in Britain's public sphere (Niall Ferguson for example) seem prone to make crucial errors in accounting for Britain's past.

[Cameron](#) rightly called the Amritsar 'shameful' and invoked Winston Churchill's own description of it as a 'monstrous' act. However, in the same visit he then splurged, in an outburst of sickly British patriotism:

*"There is an enormous amount to be proud of in what the British empire did and was responsible for. But of course there were bad events as well as good events. The bad events we should learn from and the good events we should celebrate."*

This - I believe - is an error. We cannot simply look at the Empire and take pride in the 'good' and condemn the bad. There is a danger that by claiming the 'good' bits for our national pride we cause vast offence to many nationalities, which cannot be undone by our declarations of disgust at the ugly sides of empire. As [@Sjgray86](#) so rightly pointed out on my twitter feed, 'It is also pointless - by whose yardstick are we measuring?'

There were those in India and in Britain who had called for a long overdue official apology for Amritsar. I honestly believe - in spite of my political leanings and opinions of this terrible event - Cameron was right not to apologize:

1. Because he would have been hugely criticised for his apology as cynically garnering support for arms deals with India in some quarters;
2. Apologies now would seem, in my view to be 'too little, too late' for families of the victims;
3. Cameron is not in a position to represent such an apology from Britain anyway - I actually don't believe anyone is;
4. There would be a vast list of imperial legacies to apologize for which would make a farce of the whole exercise;

There is little doubt that the majority living in Britain of 2013, if they knew enough, would feel a great sense of remorse for the many terrible acts perpetrated by people sharing the same nationality. This I think goes without saying, and can explain why so few peoples around the world now treat UK citizens with any ounce of hostility. The people committing crimes of violence, humiliation and subordination are long gone. They are consigned to the history books, and the Britain of today does not reflect many of their views, traditions or opinions - at least openly or willingly.

Cameron should have met with the families who still feel hereditary hurt from the massacre of 1919. This would have shown to the people that feel the pain most that Britain wishes them to know that feel remorse. This would have done something to quell any lasting resentment. As it is, many in India were pleased that Britain had condemned the act, which is something at least.

My overall point is that we should continue to research, understand, debate and relate to the British Empire - in all aspects. We shouldn't seek to reclaim it from the history books, either the allegedly *good* or *bad* parts. It is not ours to claim, and we should join the rest of the world in viewing it as something from which we have moved on.

I am not anti-British, but I think we should look to the positive aspects of our *current* society to draw national pride (Olympics 2012, Humanitarian Aid, Our civil society, etc.) - not a society now alien to us. It's not about forgetting, or forgiving - just learning.

For a couple of fine historical renderings of this event and its British perspectives see:

- Collett, Nigel. *The Butcher of Amritsar: General Reginald Dyer* (2006)
- Sayer, Derek, [British Reaction to the Amritsar Massacre 1919-1920](#), [www.jstor.org/stable/650872](http://www.jstor.org/stable/650872) (1991)
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And for a historiographical overview of both Indian and non-Indian works start with:

- Narain, Savita. *The historiography of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, 1919* (New Delhi, Spantech and La Patrick Longson ncer, 1998)
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